

Late Winter—A Good Time to Plant a Tree

“Late winter is a very good time to plant a tree in your yard or lot,” explained Don Lawrence, state forester, with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. “Selecting the right tree for the right place is a good first step in any landscape design, but proper planting also is important for getting your tree off to a good start. Trees are like all living creatures. They require more attention in the beginning to promote a long, healthy life.”

Lawrence recommended that homeowners and landowners carefully choose the planting site. Trees are difficult to move once they are established. Check with local authorities for regulations on placement of trees. Some communities have ordinances restricting placement of trees within a specified distance of a street, sidewalk, streetlight, or other utilities. **BEFORE DIGGING**, make sure that all underground utilities are clearly marked. You wouldn’t want to cut off the electric power to your community or risk personal injury to yourself, or your loved ones.

“Carefully follow the planting instructions that come with your tree,” said Lawrence. “If specific instructions are not available, use the following tips.”

- Dig a hole about twice the size of the tree’s root ball, or about one foot wider than the root system. The hole should be slightly shallower than the root ball. If the soil is especially heavy or wet, consider planting the tree slightly higher.
- Remove all materials from the root mass. This includes wires, string, burlap, and biodegradable containers. Neglecting this will hinder proper root growth. Gently place the tree in the center of the hole and position it to grow straight. If the tree has a prettier side, place it in the direction most frequently viewed. If planting a bare root tree, carefully spread the roots. Crumble the soil removed from the hole and cover the roots with it. As you add soil to fill in around the tree, lightly tamp the soil to collapse air pockets, or add water to help settle the soil. Air pockets around the roots can be devastating to a newly planted tree.
- Add about four inches of mulch--wood chips, shredded bark, or grass clippings--around the base of the tree, extending out to the tips of the outermost branches. A 3-foot diameter circle of mulch is common. Mulching will retain moisture, reduce weeds, maintain a more even soil temperature, and eliminate mowing next to the delicate bark. Be sure to pull the mulch away from the tree trunk because decomposing mulch can cause rot problems.
- Finally, give the tree a thorough watering. If the root ball is extremely dry, allow water to trickle into the soil by placing the hose at the trunk of the tree.

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“Young trees need protection against rodents, sun scald, lawnmowers, and grass trimmers,” said Lawrence. “Plastic guards are an inexpensive and easy control method. Light colored tree wraps can be used to protect the trunk from sunscald. Usually, staking trees is not necessary unless there is a danger of high winds.”

Select the right tree best suited for you and plant it properly. A properly planted and maintained tree will grow much faster and live much longer than one that is incorrectly planted. For the first year or two, especially after a week or so of extremely hot or dry weather, watch your tree closely for signs of moisture stress. If you see leaf wilting or hard, caked soil, water the tree well and slowly enough so the water soaks in rather than runs off.

“Take the time to give your tree a good start on life,” said Lawrence. “You and the next generation will enjoy the benefits of your tree for years to come.”

For more information on tree planting and other Backyard Conservation practices, visit the Natural Resources Conservation Service online at www.nrcs.usda.gov. Or call 1-888-LANDCARE (toll free) for a free colorful Backyard Conservation booklet and tip sheets.